

J Raptor Res. 26(2):100

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EVALUATING THE MERIT OF SINGLE OBSERVATIONS—RESPONSE TO SCHMUTZ

In reviewing the above editorial “Should single observations be published?”, I initially supported the argument wholeheartedly. My intention here was to prepare a letter expounding the merit of single observations with examples gleaned from the pages of this journal. After reviewing all of the short papers from the Journal’s first to last issue, I had to rethink my position.

One could argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with a publication with the ultimately small sample size, $N = 1$. A problem only arises in the interpretation of that information. At their worst, single observations tell us nothing about the biology of the subject and waste precious journal space. At best, they may suggest new lines of research, challenge conventional wisdom, and provide much needed information on the biology of little-known species. At very least, reports of natural history phenomena usually have the common denominator of being interesting reading. However, the economic reality of publishing a scientific journal such as *The Journal of Raptor Research* dictates that not all interesting observations can be committed to print. Given that, is there a way of separating the wheat from the chaff?

I suggest that potential authors should ask themselves a series of questions that might help them decide whether to report an observation (at least in a scientific journal; there are other avenues for publishing natural history notes). 1) Is the observation incomplete in any way (e.g., species identification, age or sex of the bird, location) that could potentially compromise the interpretation of the phenomenon? In other words, could there be something you either missed or did not know that could change the interpretation of the events? 2) Could the observation be the result of aberrant behavior caused by disease, toxins, human disturbance or captivity? In some cases, of course, the consequences of such factors are of interest; however, in others aberrant behavior may be well known and of little interest. 3) Has the same or similar phenomenon been reported before for the same species in other populations? Although, species x has never been seen to eat species y, it may not warrant publication if prey species a, b and c are known and similar to y. I consider many single accounts of food habits of Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*; we know they can eat just about anything), Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) capturing mammals (yet another species caught is of questionable interest), and kleptoparasitism (known to be rather common for a wide range of species) to be redundant and hence unnecessary. 4) Can I get more data or combine data sets? Bird banders, or researchers with long-term projects, might want to delay reporting unusual events such as plumage aberrations, injuries and acts of predation (to name a few popular subjects) until more observations accumulate on the same or related topics. The publication of the collective effort results in a more effective and economical publication.

If you can answer “yes” to any of the above questions, think twice before you submit your paper. Finally, ask yourself “What could someone do with this information?” This is the tough one. If you can’t think of a way that your observation could potentially be of value, then perhaps a non-scientific audience is preferable.—**Gary R. Bortolotti, Department of Biology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada S7N 0W0.**

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HUNTING BEHAVIOR OF AUDUBON’S CRESTED CARACARA

Caracaras are well known scavengers and carrion eaters, and have been observed to kleptoparasitize other raptors, gulls and pelicans (W.C. Glazener 1964, *Condor* 66:162; L. Brown and D. Amadon 1968, Eagles, hawks and falcons of the World, McGraw-Hill, NY), but are also capable of hunting live prey. While foraging they fly close to the ground or perch on high observation posts for long periods of time. Their long legs and extended claws make them well suited for walking and running (J.N. Layne 1985, *Florida Wildl.* 39:40–42).

We observed Crested Caracaras from 7 June to 29 August in 1990, and from 10 June to 3 August in 1991 at the McArthur Agro-ecology Center (MAERC) of the Archbold Biological Station, a 4200-ha cattle ranch. The site consists of improved pastures, Cabbage Palm (*Sabal palmetto*) hammocks, native wetlands and Live Oak (*Quercus virginianus*) uplands. During the above mentioned period, adult caracaras still fed young that had fledged that year. We observed